Community Engagement in Emergency School Feeding Initiatives: The Case of Quiha Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) Location, Tigray-Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study explored community engagement in emergency school feeding initiatives in Quiha, Tigray, Ethiopia, a conflict-affected region hosting internally displaced peoples (IDPs). Employing a qualitative case study design, the research explored how community members participate in school feeding programs and their relative strengths, the pathways utilized to mobilize the social capital relevant for the community-based school feeding initiatives. Data were collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions with parents, students, teachers, community leaders, representatives of non-government organizations (NGOs) operating in the area, and analyzed thematically. The study revealed that community-based approaches are effective to context in promoting the reintegration and retention of internally displaced children in basic education. Amid adversities, the community-based approach observed to have leverage local resources, foster ownership, and integrate indigenous socio-cultural values, enhancing social cohesion and helps to mitigating conflict. The research underscores the pivotal role of social capital, built on trust and cooperation, in empowering communities to address their needs. It advocates for a shift from transactional to transformational roles for non-state actors, emphasizing community empowerment and the revitalization of local potential during both crises and normalcy. The study concludes that community-based school feeding effectively leverages social assets and capital, supporting initiatives during and after crises, and recommends that government and non-government organizations prioritize strategies that advocate for and sustain community engagement in their school feeding programs.

Keywords: Children retention, Community engagement; Host community; Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs)

Introduction

Education in Emergencies (EiE) interventions require the engagement of communities in the quest to improve access to education for internally displaced children (Hanon, 2022). This may include school feeding programs in "IDP camps" or areas convenient for the community and students. Community engagement not only fosters access to adequate nutrition and education, but it also serves vital instruments for children's safety and well-being. Community-based emergency school feeding programs help children stay in school, especially in humanitarian contexts and crises (Hanon, 2022; WFP, 2022). For example, a recent study by the World Food Program (WFP) showed that 40% of IDPs had poor food consumption, indicating a pressing need for food assistance, including school feeding programs (WFP, 2023). Therefore, school feeding programs play a vital role in supporting the well-being and education of children in IDP camps, host communities, and refugee settings.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC, 2023), mainly due to man-made factors, internal displacement in Ethiopia has increased fourfold since it was ten years ago. Currently, displacement due to armed conflict stands to be a top compelling factor among the population. The prevailing situation, coupled with insecurity and slow response to build resilience, has become rather a source of frequent conflict in multiple regions, which contributed to the complexity of the agenda. Hence, in Ethiopia, despite the scaling of the problem, attempts to find solutions are still far below the required level. In this regard, in conflict-prone areas, there is a huge number of internally displaced people with a high-risk and challenging environment in which new displacements are likely to continue (Tsegay & Gezahegne, 2023; UNHCR, 2023). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) report on tracking surveys on displacement, nearly 2 million additional people have been displaced in over 1,220 sites in Ethiopia since 2023 (IOM, 2024; IDMC, 2024). Most of these IPDs (68%) were displaced due to inter-communal conflicts, the other 19% were due to drought, and 6% were displaced due to seasonal floods (UNHCR, 2023). Women and children are disproportionately targeted and subjected to considerable challenges including but not limited to lack of access to basic needs such as food, water, and shelter, as well as are exposure to gender-based violence (MoE, 2023; Desalegn et al., 2023).

As per the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) of Ethiopia (2024), the magnitude of the emergency crisis is seriously affecting over 8 million people in nine regions, of which the majority of children and their parents are victims of rounds of displacements (International Rescue Committee (IRC, 2024). The duration of the emergency is getting chronic and poses a significant burden to the government and development partners. Despite the varied

potential related to social assets, external solutions, including an increasing dependency on humanitarian aid, are increasingly sought by governments at the local and national levels. This requires an urgent need to explore evidence-based insights on how to boost community engagement with available opportunities, such as maximizing emergency school feeding. This effort contributes to evidence-based responses to emergency programming strategies and IDP communities' capacity-building initiatives. Equally, exploring the existing school feeding pathways helps to identify their unique features and eventually provides insights into how the different pathways could interact to address societal problems.

In this regard, a deeper look at how community engagement practices are implemented in school feeding during emergencies to enhance children's learning is critical. Despite the policy provisions on the importance of community engagement in emergency school feeding programs, there appears to be little evidence on how the communities engage in context. While some studies have highlighted the benefits of community participation in emergency school feeding programs such as improved program effectiveness (Tull & Plunkett, 2018) others have emphasized the need for clear guidelines and strengthened efforts of community engagement before and during emergencies (Colón-Ramos, Monge-Rojas, Weil, Olivares, Zavala, Grilo & Duran, 2022). In addition, studies have highlighted the need to strengthen community engagement efforts before and during emergencies to ensure that students have access to meals. Other studies have found that participation in emergency school meals is still low, meaning a large proportion of students may be at risk for food insecurity, and innovative approaches are needed to mitigate increased food insecurity (Agbetsise, Crystal, Charlotte, & Adebayo, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

According to the social capital theory (Coleman, 1999; Kumatsu, 2022; Putnam, 2000;), community engagement plays a pivotal role in creating and executing school feeding programs and fosters a sense of ownership and appreciation for education. When communities actively participate, they are likely to advocate for their children's schooling, recognizing the critical role education plays in rebuilding their lives.

According to the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2023), emergency school feeding programs serve to address both immediate nutritional needs and the economic pressures faced by families. Moreover, as emphasized by Ayenew (2023), providing meals to internally displaced children be it in camps, communities, or at school, not only addresses challenges related to food insecurity but mainly survival and social interactions to recovery. It also helps to motivate families to enroll and keep their children in school, as the promise of a meal reduces the financial burden of child labor or other obligations. As families perceive tangible benefits through school feeding initiatives, attendance rates are likely to increase. Higher attendance is closely linked to improved retention, as students are more likely to stay in school when they receive adequate nourishment, which enhances their concentration and overall learning experience (Assefa &Urga,2020; MoE, 2023).

The researcher has extensive experience in the education sector, having worked as a schoolteacher, consultant, and coordinator of various local and international non-government organizations. Furthermore, from the current emergency response tasks and research activities involved, the researcher learned that community engagement in emergency school feeding programs is a critical issue but an overlooked agenda in the quest for social cohesion. Moreover, the few research works in the area hardly scrutinized the actual essence of host community engagement in relief and recovery and the ways taking the context of various conflict-affected regions in Ethiopia. Consequently, the research is guided by the following research questions.

- How and in what ways do community members participate in emergency school feeding initiatives at the Quiha IDPs location?
- What are the relative advantages of community-based emergency school feeding initiatives over other feeding approaches at the Quiha IDPs location?
- What are the community engagement pathways utilized to mobilize the resource and social capital of the community at the Quiha IDPs location?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In view of Komatsu (2024), conflict poses considerable challenges to host and internally displaced communities. It creates ardent challenges and strains related to resources and services. These pressures often result in IDP children being denied their right to education and adequate nutrition. Community engagement practices are vital in facilitating children's access to education and nutrition, with various notable initiatives emerging from local communities. Nevertheless, there is a lack of comprehensive evidence on how these communities interact and engage in practices that utilize available school feeding pathways, which are crucial for fostering inter-community cohesion and promoting school retention (Assefa & Urga, 2020).

The concept of "community" is central to social sciences and humanities. Historically, since the late 1880s, the subject has received widespread attention on the meaning, of how communities evolve and grow, for example from pre-industrial to industrial society (Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004). Regardless of the context and chronology, the studies on the kinds and characteristics of communities underlie a common frame of reference, which is the social structure and relationships to be common denominators (Hatcher, Bringle & Muthiah, 2004).

In line with human development, the word "community" has various meanings for different groups in different circumstances. The classic work by Arnstein (1969), in dealing with the ladder of citizen participation, identified over ninety alternative definitions of community and noted that the list is not exhaustive. In general, the essence and definition of a community may expand, or

contract based on four broader community domains: geographic, ethnic/racial, shared values/assets, and philanthropy (Farrell, & Hartwell, A. 2008)

Community, as defined in this study, is a dynamic network of individuals and groups united by shared geography, culture, or values. These communities actively collaborate to address challenges, build resilience, and improve well-being. Key elements include geographic proximity, cultural diversity, shared values, collective action, and resilience. Communities can be physical or virtual, diverse in culture, and united by shared beliefs. Effective community engagement involves collaborative efforts to achieve common goals, leading to greater resilience.

The classical works of Putnam (2000, 2001) on social capital theory posit that communities possess "social capital" – valuable resources stemming from strong relationships, trust, and cooperation. This capital manifests in three forms: bonding (intra-community support), bridging (inter-group connections), and linking (relationships with those in power). In emergencies, these forms are crucial: bonding facilitates community mobilization and mutual aid, bridging enables inter-organizational collaboration, and linking secures external support. Along these elements, trust and cooperation are paramount for an effective response.

School feeding programs can significantly contribute to social capital by providing a common ground for community interaction and relationship building. Ultimately, social capital theory underscores the importance of community-based initiatives in emergency response, emphasizing that strong social connections, trust, and cooperation within and between communities are vital for successful crisis management, especially in areas like school feeding programs.

Complementing the social capital theory, community organizing theory mainly anchors on trust and dynamic interaction to problems at hand (Christens, & Speer, 2015). In the context of internally displaced people, it is a social action process that aims to allow people relief and recovery and also gain mastery over their lives and the lives of their communities (Alter, Driver, Frumento, Howard, Shuffstall, Thompson, & Whitmer, 2017). It is based on the principles of empowerment, community competence, active participation, and starting where the people are. Community engagement, on the other hand, is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people (Alter, Driver, Frumento, Howard, Shuffstall, Thompson, & Whitmer, 2017). The practice and theory of community organizing provide useful insights into community engagement research. Researchers and practitioners need to understand the cultural dynamics of specific groups and institutions to build relationships, identify ways to effectively collaborate, and build respect and trust (Christens & Speer, 2015).

Thematically, social capital (social assets and collective commitment to a purpose) is the vital engine for life-saving and sustaining. Amid the adversities, community resilience encompasses

bonding (internal ties), bridging (inter-group connections), and linking (external relationships). Trust and cooperation are essential for leveraging these forms. Community initiatives, like school feeding programs, which are usually initiated by volunteers and social groups, foster social networks. Strong social capital improves crisis management by enabling effective communication, collaboration, and resource mobilization. This empowerment leads to enhanced resilience, allowing communities to better withstand and recover from emergencies. Ultimately, robust social connections and active participation are crucial for effective crisis response and recovery.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design—an empirical study that scrutinizes an existing phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009; Mariam, 1998). A case study design is relevant to answer questions that seek deep exploration, such as "how" and "why" issues. A case study was employed as the intent of the research was to explore the engagement of the local community in emergency school feeding initiatives. The study aims to unearth the lived experiences and contexts surrounding feeding initiatives without controlling the behaviors of the participants. In so doing, a social constructivist paradigm was employed to obtain the real meaning and sense of community engagement in the emergency school feeding initiative (Miles & Huberman, 2016).

During the study period, close to 1.4 million people were in IDP centers in the Tigray regional state (MoE, 2022). Most of the IDPs left their homes due to the deadly conflict that began in 2020 and continued for two years in the Tigray region. In an approach to select the study location, experts from the regional education bureau were consulted, and those IDP camps that implement education in emergencies were checked. Besides, access and security issues were also considered to select IDPs from those that existed in the region. Concomitantly, active community engagement in school feeding and the availability of IDP children attending their schooling were employed. Taking displacement due to armed conflict as a point of reference, two criteria, namely: IDP children have access to formal schools and learning with host children; and presence of local host and displaced community engagement practices to retain displaced children in schools for two or more previous years were considered to identify two case schools: Kiros Gessese and Queha primary schools. Based on the above procedure Quiha IDP location was selected for the study.

Based on the Quiha local administration report, during the study period (2023/24), a total of 212 (F 121, M 91) IDP children were reintegrated into four primary surrounding schools along with the children coming from the host communities. Of the four schools, two primary schools that reintegrated 65% of the IDP children were included in the study.

Informants and Instruments

The study employed three key informant interviews and four focus group discussions. The key informants' interviews were conducted with local leaders, non-state actors (NGOs), and education officers, and the FGDs were conducted with parents from the host communities, IDPs, teachers, and principals. Both interview and focus group discussion (FGD) guides were used in the research. These guides serve as structured frameworks for the expert interviewer and the FGD facilitator, ensuring that the discussions remain focused and relevant to the research objectives. Utilizing these guides allowed the data collector to effectively facilitate the conversations, encouraging participants to share their experiences and insights. It is noteworthy that these guides including interview and focus group discussion items were translated into the local language (i.e., Tigrigna) to effectively communicate with the research participants. The interviewers received a short orientation on key concepts of the research including the terms included in the interview guide. This approach seemed to have not only facilitated accurate data collection but also contributed to the trust and respect of the cultural and linguistic contexts of the participants, enabling richer and more nuanced discussions with the participants. The research participants were informed about the purpose of the research before the interview sessions. Their consent to participate in the interviews was obtained, and the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the research participants were sorted and aligned along the thematic topics, mainly engagement practices and their relative strengths, pathways, and utilization of social capital in emergency school feeding programs. The responses from all key informants including parents, community representatives, school directors, teachers, and students were consulted, reviewed, and refined. Field-level information and responses and records were transcribed, coded, and grouped into different themes informed by the extant literature and the research questions. The processes of coding and theme development were done along topics supported by an Atlas-ti (a computer software program designed to manage the analysis of qualitative data).

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretations

Community Participation in Community-Based Feeding Program at Quiha, Tigray-Ethiopia

Development

The community-based feeding program at Quiha was started a few months after the outbreak of the war between the FDRE and TPLF by a group of volunteers who have known each other since childhood. Initially, the volunteers met at a coffeehouse and, all of a sudden started to challenge themselves about what they could do to address parts of the community problems hovering in their city—Quiha, the oldest city located on the outskirts of Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray Regional State. As the war between the FDRE and TPLF reached its apex, the number of displaced people from different parts of the region and beyond increased dramatically. Some of these displaced individuals lived in IDP camps, while others stayed with relatives. The volunteers then agreed to make the most of their abilities and initiate a feeding program that helps children of displaced individuals. One of the founders of the feeding program remembered *"We agreed to solicit resources and feed the hungry children suffering from hunger. We had nothing by then. We did not even have money to feed a few children for at least one day"* (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).

The volunteers then started to knock on the doors of many organizations, including churches, NGOs, government organizations, philanthropists, etc. They also mobilize others who volunteer to collect money and other resources during public and religious occasions such as church festivities. The volunteers were also directed to collect money by going into public recreation areas and asking resource persons in the diaspora community. The volunteer group, after passing these hassles, launched its first feeding program on the 29th of March, 2022. Initially, its capacity was limited to only 60 schoolchildren screened from four primary schools located in the city. Schoolteachers, directors, and representatives of parents took a vital role and devotion in screening and facilitating the smooth feeding process, including preparation.

The feeding program has shown exponential growth both in terms of the resources and the number of children that received morning meals. During the study periods, about 450 children were getting morning meals, mainly breakfast. The majority (i.e., more than 350) get their morning breakfast regularly. In addition, other groups who including orphans and widows (over 100), get breakfast occasionally. Besides, a board of trustees composed of seven members was established to enhance accountability and transparency of the feeding program. The informant posited that:

Currently, the governance of the feeding program is operated under the ˈHAYRAˈ[1] association—an association that got its name after the religious event celebrated at the beginning of June. The board of trustees has drafted legislation and then everything such as recruitment and resource management operated according to the drafted legislation. Everything collected from the community is then registered and a receipt is issued by the accountants employed for the feeding program" (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).

This implies that the feeding program involves various actors beyond the volunteer groups. The need to affiliate with the HAYRA association was a strategic choice taken to improve the resource base of the feeding program. The association helped the volunteer groups to get access to the members of the association residing in Ethiopia and other countries so that mutual support could be fostered. Besides, it has helped the volunteer group to formalize parts of its activities in terms of accountability, transparency, and responsiveness issues.

The feeding program was primarily designed for the children who came from displaced families residing either in the IDPs or elsewhere with their relatives. However, given the pervasiveness of the problem, children who came from the hosting community were also getting feeding services. The feeding program involves only breakfast; thus, children come to the feeding center early in the morning before they go to school. The breakfast was chosen for practical and health-related reasons. The volunteer argued, *"morning meal is very vital for the children. If they get a good meal in the morning, they will have a bright day in the school" (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).* Administering morning meals is also important as most of the volunteers, including the parents, engaged in the preparation of the meals have their own business during the days.

The morning meals were distributed in public spaces closer to the main road. The surrounding community members were observed to have cleaned the spaces and arranged the facilities as a shared responsibility of serving the children. The cooking place for the morning meal was rented at a reasonable price from a local villager. Food items were stored and prepared inside small houses rented for feeding purposes. The morning meals were prepared by volunteers selected from the host community and IDPs. Mothers of the displaced children participated in cooking, washing, and serving food to the displaced and local children.

Despite prime duty and high expectations, limited shared roles and responsibilities were observed on the side of the government. From the study, instability, and incapability of the regional government to direct implementation seem to have left the potential dependency on volunteers, communities, and NGOs. Furthermore, it was observed that negligence on the side of the government has posed risks to the long-term burden of sustainability of programs on communities.

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[1] Hayra is also known in other places of Ethiopia among adherents of the Orthodox Christian church with the name ˈBuhieˈ.

Additionally, coordinating efforts among multiple NGOs and government agencies was also observed as challenging which led to inefficiencies and duplication of services.

Menu

The menu of the feeding program is somewhat localized based on the consultations with mothers and other health practitioners. The voluntary mother groups are engaged in creative analysis and decision of "better meals" for children. According to the interviewees and focused group discussions, the mothers insisted that culturally appropriate and cost-efficient meals are better for the children compared to the dry biscuit given by government or NGOs. Accordingly, the morning meal includes a cup of barely flour juice "*aka* Besso" often coupled with a home-prepared loaf of bread. Initially, there were attempts to provide the children with cooked rice and macaroni. However, the children were not comfortable with such food items. According to the community volunteers and mothers, the choice of barley flour juice "Besso" with a loaf of bread (100g) was found to be beneficial due to three critical issues. First, it is culturally appropriate and familiar to the children. The children who received morning meals are accustomed to bread and Besso rather than other food items, for example, rice. Secondly, these food items are easily accessible from the local market. Third, compared to others (for example, preparing tea which requires sugar), Besso was found to be nutritious and suitable to the beneficiaries. Cost-wise, Besso was also economical. A discussant mother strengthened as:

> *Initially, the mothers were providing rice and macaroni to the children" but they learned that the children feel bored in the absence of tea which we observed the fear of being to tea addiction; now sugar is too scarce; we also consulted health professionals, advised better to use "Besso" in place of a cup of tea (FGD, 24 April 2024).*

However, the meal was not always identical. The volunteer group, in collaboration with the community and mothers, develops other food items. For example, during festivals, special meals and drinks were prepared. In so doing, the volunteers and mothers exert additional effort to solicit the resources for the additional food items to be provided during the holidays.

Relative Strengths of Community-Based Feeding Program

As one size doesn't fit all, there appear to be different forms of feeding programs, each with unique features and modes of implementation. Therefore, this section attempts to synthesize the relative strengths of the community-based feeding program based on the experiences of the Quiha community-based feeding initiative. While so doing, the relative strengths are outlined based on the researcher's long-standing experiences working in different NGOs and participant reflections:

Diversified Income Generation and Mobilization Strategies: The way resources are generated and mobilized is different in the case of the emergency feeding program introduced and practiced at

the Quiha feeding initiative. Unlike others, the feeding initiatives at Quiha utilized diversified strategies—including lotteries and individual donations to solicit resources for the feeding program. One male interviewee from the volunteers replied:

> *In the beginning, we did not have money—we had only a small amount even insufficient to provide breakfast for one day. But, as we started to utilize different income generation strategies including begging from churches, individual volunteers, and travelers, and at the same time, we tried to collect money through lotteries, we were able to collect an amazing amount of money sufficient for weeks" (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).*

The emergency feeding programs have a higher possibility to test and adapt different resource generation strategies. Some of these strategies are applicable to the socio-economic and cultural context of local people. More or less, the community-based emergency school feeding programs are owned by the community.

Comparison with the Government-Introduced School Feeding Program: The Mekelle city administration introduced a school feeding program to all primary school students in mid-February 2023. The morning breakfast that has been introduced at the Quiha primary school to the internally displaced children was then questioned because it was not aligned with the already existing community initiative. Moreover, schoolteachers and directors questioned its relevance as the children expect to get meals in the schools. However, the municipality was not able to continue the school feeding program. One interviewee claimed *"I understand that the government has many assignments to do and so the interruption in school feeding should not surprise us"* (Interviewee, March 30, 2024). Unlike the government introduced school feeding, the community-based emergency school feeding introduced by the volunteers survived and seems to be more impactful. In the cases of the community-based emergency school feeding program, volunteers with the courage to support children by mobilizing existing resources from the community tend to work both for the benefit of the children and, at the same time, to realize their ambition. One interviewee confirmed that *"the morning feeding did not stop because the team is working hard in mobilizing resources both from the community and, in fact, from our pockets"* (Interviewee, March, 30,2024). This tends to imply that the emergency feeding program introduced by volunteers is somehow sustainable compared to those initiated by the government.

Comparison with other NGO-Supported School Feeding programs: The emergency feeding initiatives given to school children are also different from those feeding programs that were operated by different NGOs such as Luminos Fund and Geneva Global and affiliated implementing partners such as Tigray Development Association, Operation Rescue, Mekaneyesus, Tigray Youth Empowerment Solutions (TYES) to mention a few. From the field study, apart the bilateral food aid to IDPs, most implementing NGOs hardly support the school feeding programs on a standalone. Rather they provide the feeding program mostly coupled with other programs such as peacebuilding, environment, or accelerated education programs. Besides, NGO-driven feeding

programs are given mainly to support out-of-school children in the hardest-to-reach areas. The interviewee discussed the school feeding program through the support of Geneva Global integrates with parent self-help groups which directly links with encouraging children to get back to school. The field study at community-based feeding programs focused on internally displaced children living in urban areas such as Quiha ought to have been linked with the NGO planning. In this regard, community-based / supported emergency feeding programs were observed to have greater potential, be more suitable and responsive to the people who need life-saving interventions, and other emergency interventions to recovery and enhance resilience.

Utilization of Social Capital to Mobilize Resources

Community-based emergency school feeding programs largely rely on the resources and social capital of the community. Hence, this section outlines the social resources utilized to implement the emergency school feeding and the ways through which the social capital of the community was utilized to realize the emergency school feeding initiatives.

Social Networks: The local community uses its social networks (both formal and informal) to mobilize resources relevant to the feeding program. One interviewee confirmed that *"we obliged every member of the community to make our objective their agenda in any of their social networks including the religious and non-religious festivities" (Interviewee, March, 30,2024)*. The founders intended to integrate their prime aspiration of mutual support to save lives agenda into the community so that they could donate resources in the name of the religion they adhere. For example, churches were donating both monetary and non-monetary resources to the emergency school feeding program. Likewise, the church leaders told adherents of the orthodox church to donate and support the children. The attempt to embed the emergency school feeding in the social networks of the community helps expand the vision of the volunteers and eventually increase the number of children benefit from the morning meals.

It was learned that the community is intact in many aspects*, inter alia*, religion, politics, and economy. This has helped to disseminate information to the community easily. In other words, the social bond helped the community to participate in the feeding programs. The informant from the community who was promised to support 60 children per month (two children per day) cutting their hair as *"supporting the vulnerable children gives mental satisfaction…I have also the responsibility to support others when it comes to religion) (Interviewee, March 25, 2024)*. A similar view was reflected by one of the founders of the feeding program as

> *Many come to help us—for example, to be engaged in food preparation events such as washing dishes, cooking, and mixing. We don't know who they told them. We believe the social network—formal or informal one help them to have information about the objectives and practices of work" (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).*

Albeit subjected to a wide range of criticism, the community has a culture of organizing different religious events (for example, during baptizing, weddings, ´Zikir´- a religious practice undertaken to commemorate deceased ones). Hence, efforts were made to convince members of the community to donate the money they were to spend to such events to the internally displaced children. One teacher discussant interviewee iterated as

Many brought the food they prepared for their wedding, birthdays, ´zikir´ and many others to the internally displaced children… [and the HA] publicize such practices both to the children, religious leaders, and the community so that others could follow making donations to the morning meals (FGD, March, 30,2024).

This implies that social networks and capital have been instrumental in supporting the emergency school feeding initiative. In so doing, communication appears to be important to disseminate the information to the wider community and, at the same time, utilize the societal capital of the community.

Trust Building: The young volunteers who founded of the community-based emergency school feeding initiative gave due emphasis to build strong relationships, interconnections within groups, and trust with the local community and other countries outside the home. They bestow substantial effort to enhance transparency and accountability in their operations. To improve transparency and accountability, the association has nominated a board of trustees. One informant who participated in the resource mobilization reflected as

Despite the rumors, the association has now developed strict procedures that ensure accountability and transparency. It has its own finance head; thus, anything donated to the association passes through legal measures: it needs to get legal receipts, get registered and enter into the store. The same story happens when the items are out of stock (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).

Keeping this into account, additional measures that promote interaction and trust were institutionalized. The feeding program is given in open spaces and walkways. This has given an opportunity for the community to build trust in what is happening. *"The community developed trust in what we did as it has the opportunity to see children eating their breakfast every morning in an open space"* (Interviewee, March, 30,2024).

Furthermore, efforts have also been undertaken to enhance team spirit and inclusion within the emergency school feeding initiative. The informant claimed that *"despite their ethnic-based conflict and animosity, the association has been supporting wives of the Ethiopian defense force who were left in the military camps" (Interviewee, March 30, 2024).* Therefore, the long-standing co-existence of the people irrespective of their political views and ethnicity is further built in the feeding program by giving chances to all segments of society. One interviewee said "politics is not our issue" *(Interviewee, March 30, 2024).* There are also attempts to include children with disabilities. *"Currently, there are seven children who receive support in their homes. The*

association gave them like 500 birr per month so that their parents could get them food in their homes" (FGD, March 30, 2024)

Pathways Supporting the Community-Based School Feeding

The community-based emergency school feeding initiative at Quiha location was the most feasible response of the host community to life-saving and life-sustaining of both IDP parents and the children. Nevertheless, it was not standalone innovation as it overlaps with other pathways be it in schools and within communities. Despite the difficulties in harmonization, it was found that school-based, home-based, and NGO-based initiatives and paths were supporting community-based emergency school feeding. The varied pathways supporting community-based school feeding are presented below.

School-Based

Despite being short (two weeks), the Quiha local administration has been reported to have engaged in delivering school-based feeding to all children attending the Quiha primary and surrounding primary schools. Such initiation was a surprise to the communities and schools. According to school directors, this initiative appeared to be politically motivated, inadequately planned, and overly ambitious. The school-based feeding initiative was planned to involve cooked rice and a cup of tea for school children for five days a week. However, this program reportedly lasted only two weeks.

The situation in Quiha presents significant lessons in how isolated interventions pose challenges to the initiatives and implementation of school-based feeding programs. From the study, as a triangulated response from the key informants, the motive behind the sudden politically driven school feeding was more propaganda than genuine performance. School directors believe that such programs require considerable attention, substantial financial resources, and adequate human resources. However, given the context of the region, schools in Quiha face numerous challenges, including a shortage of water, inadequate furniture (benches and blackboards), and a lack of basic resources.

The school-based feeding program converges with the community-based feeding program given by the volunteers had supported by the local government ought to have reached more beneficiaries. More or less, children who did not get access to community-based emergency school feeding were benefited. Hence, it extends the assumption of community-based feeding initiatives.

Home-based

Home-based feeding, commonly known as the home take ration, has emerged as a vital relief mechanism for families affected by the armed conflict in Tigray. This program was primarily established to secure the survival of displaced populations by providing essential food items amid crises. Following the onset of conflict, countless families faced dire circumstances, including the loss of their homes and means of living. The home-take ration was specifically designed to address these urgent needs, delivering basic nutritional support directly to households and thereby saving lives during a critical recovery phase.

The distribution of home take rations was generally carried out through local partners, who played a crucial role in ensuring that vulnerable families received the assistance they needed. Initially, these rations were provided on a fortnightly basis, but as conditions began to improve, the distribution frequency was adjusted to a monthly schedule. The rations primarily consisted of staples such as wheat flour, rice, and oil, selected for their nutritional value and durability, making them suitable for families in distress. Over time, however, it became apparent that relying solely on these basic rations could result in limited dietary diversity, raising concerns about the long-term health and nutritional well-being of the affected populations.

Although the home-take ration was not explicitly aimed at supporting children's educational needs, it significantly contributed to the overall stability of families during their recovery. By ensuring access to essential food supplies, families were better positioned to focus on rebuilding their lives, including prioritizing the education of their children. Therefore, while the primary goal of the program was immediate relief, it inadvertently fostered a more stable environment that supported learning and development. This experience underscores the critical connection between food security and educational opportunities, highlighting that comprehensive support systems are essential for the holistic recovery of communities affected by conflict.

NGO Based

Following the armed conflict, the Ethiopian Mekaneyesus church, Operation Rescue Ethiopia (ORE) and two other local NGOs were struggling to set up their settlement and respond to the huge demand of the villagers. Moreover, the volunteers at Quiha school feeding initiatives organized under the Hayra association evolved from a desperate need to respond to the crisis and seem to have taken the crucial role of live-saving during the deep grief of the villagers.

The existence of such NGOs engaged in feeding programs was vital to the volunteers. First it has helped them to get experience and insights regarding the feeding initiatives. Second, these NGOs

were considered as potential resources to support the community-based emergency school feeding program. In some cases, the leadership engaged in community-based emergency school feeding attempts to create a link for some parents and children who seek money and other resources for schooling and medications. One volunteer mother, for instance, shared her experience, saying:

I had concerns about my child's health and discussed it with the Hayra association staff. Fortunately, the Hayra association communicated with partner organizations like Moms for Moms—a local organization operating in Tigray, and one member of the feeding program informed me that the organization decided to provide me with about 1500 birr for my child's medication. If the Hayra association wasn′t there, I might not have received this benefit" (FGD, April 20, 2024)

According to the informants, to maximize the benefits of NGO involvement while mitigating potential challenges, it is crucial to promote collaboration, coordination, and local ownership. By fostering partnerships, building capacity, and ensuring that programs are aligned with government priorities. Aligning available aid with local community champions NGOs suggested they can make a significant contribution to improving the well-being of vulnerable populations through fostering integrated community-school feeding initiatives.

The study emphasized that despite the challenges, community members are vital to emergency school feeding, contributing through volunteerism (food preparation, logistics, sanitation), resource mobilization (donations, fundraising), and program management (committees, decision-making). They also engage in advocacy, raise awareness, secure support, and facilitate information sharing where the youth groups were found vital in facilitating the link between the local and international. Moreover, the link between the youth social groups, religious institutions, and the diaspora, crucially, provided harmonized social support, ensuring culturally appropriate food and emotional well-being. This diverse participation, driven by altruism and self-interest, was found pivotal for the program's success and sustainability, varying based on the crisis's severity and community resources.

The findings of the study asserted that community-based emergency school feeding initiatives present a compelling advantage over alternative pathways due to their inherent ability to cultivate resilience and long-term sustainability. Unlike school-based programs, which limit engagement to staff, community-led initiatives foster robust social capital through shared ownership and collective action. This strengthens local networks, crucial for sustained support during crises. Moreover, during the field observations and triangulations, the community-based as a strong advantage in leveraging local knowledge ensure culturally appropriate and targeted aid. On the contrary, this was a hard feat often challenging for NGO-based programs, which, despite efficiency, can foster dependency. In contrast to home-based approaches, which risk isolation and monitoring difficulties, community-led models offer flexibility and adaptability, responding

swiftly to evolving needs. In line with relief and resilience, essentially, the strategies shall allow to empower communities to manage their resources, enhancing efficiency and minimizing reliance on external aid. While requiring strong community organization and external support for optimal effectiveness, the community-based approach prioritizes local capacity building, fostering long-term resilience and well-being in times of emergency and normalcy.

Discussions

This study underscored the critical role of community participation in effective emergency school feeding programs, highlighting their diverse contributions from practical tasks to strategic governance. Youth groups served as crucial links to international support, while collaborative efforts ensured comprehensive social care. The research championed community-based initiatives for their superior resilience and sustainability. Unlike restrictive school-based models, community-led approaches fostered social capital and leveraged local knowledge for culturally appropriate aid, surpassing NGO-based programs prone to dependency and isolated home-based models. These initiatives offered flexibility, empowered communities to manage resources, and prioritized capacity building, ensuring long-term resilience. The study also triangulated and confirmed the huge burden of host community bearing for a longer period in the absence of complementary support for relief recovery and resilience.

The study revealed that emergency school feeding programs largely call for local community engagement with little or no reward for the work and sacrifice of the locals. Without the generous and committed engagement of the community, emergency school feeding initiatives are futile. Hence, the community is at the center of all activities of the emergency school feeding initiatives; it can participate in a range of areas including but not limited to planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation activities. However, community engagement in such emergency school feeding initiatives requires ample resources and committed, accountable, and transparent leadership. The study revealed that community members have the capacity to initiate and extend the scope of the emergency school feeding programs. The initiation of the emergency school feeding program by a group of committed individuals which later extended to include various community resource mobilizers testified that community-based emergency school feeding programs can be initiated as a humanitarian response and later evolve into a legally registered full-fledged organizational structure (having board of trustees and full-time staff) envisioned to address community problems.

Social assets, in particular social networking and trust building, were found engines to activate potential for social capital. In this regard, volunteers and religious institutions were found to be instrumental in community engagement in the emergency school feeding initiative. Specifically, emotions of sympathy and the courage to contribute, characterized by genuine hospitality from members of the respective host communities, were observed to be strong. This regular genuine

hospitality manifested both at homes to streets and the religious yards boosted collective emotional support, facilitating shelter, and providing meals. As a result, host communities played a crucial role in relief and healing efforts in response to the adversities and calamities experienced by the IDPs. Furthermore, smooth interactions among groups in daily routines and effective networking within the community were reported to have played a key role in supporting recovery efforts. These interactions helped to build trust, mutual respect, and cohesion between host communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Overall, while limited resources, vulnerability, and ongoing conflict pose significant risks, the presence of strong social assets and capital was observed to mitigate these challenges and create a more resilient community. By harnessing the power of social networks, communities can foster trust, cooperation, and mutual support, which are essential for the successful implementation of emergency school feeding programs and the well-being of IDP children.

The social capital theory and the community organizing theories share in common that the local communities are at the center of the solution by unleashing previously existing bonding, bridging, and linking the social assets to social capital betterments. In this regard, the Quiha communities have done exemplary practices that explore, unleash, and maximize the social capital into practice for greater results and defined purpose.

From the theoretical viewpoint, the community-based pathway seems to be grounded in enhancing potential social assets and social capital. In this regard, the community-based approach seems to have fostered higher levels of community engagement due to local involvement and ownership. On the other side, in the study, the school-based pathway in the context of Quiha was short-lived (served only two weeks), yet had it integrated with community assets it would have a better advantage as schools hold facilities and spaces. In the study, however, even the short-lived school-based initiative was observed less structured and unsustainable approaches as it didn't closely link with local Indigenous knowledge practices. In economically poor communities coupled with water and firewood shortages, as observed in areas like Quiha, while the home-based pathway may strongly allow for efficiency, flexibility, and security, it may lack the monitoring and equality of direct access and use for children compared to the other two pathways. The community-based although highly appreciable and worth mobilizing resources through volunteerism networking and trust, was learned that, as a standalone pathway can hardly be sustained for a long period due to the huge burden on local members. Thus, the need to harmonize the different pathways and render resource inputs which include ideas, materials, facilities, and networking to the community-based emergency school feeding initiatives stands crucial.

Conclusions and Implications

War and conflict jeopardize the relevance, equity, and access to education. It poses direct challenges to the material and human assets of the education system causing high dropout rates, learning poverty and loss, and reduced student enrolment. Teachers and students often confront unspeakable challenges, including death and displacement. Pervasive displacement also results in the repurposing of schools as temporary shelters for internally displaced people. Therefore, war has a multifaceted impact on education. During such pervasive challenges, the community has an instrumental role in designing and implementing new innovations that help to mitigate the impact of the war on vulnerable parts of the community such as children, elders, lactating mothers, etc. In this regard, social assets and capital have wider tendencies to reinforce and channel community-based innovations that influence community engagement in a range of activities relevant to reversing, and /or minimizing the effects of war on different segments of society. More specifically, the resources and networks within certain communities such as peer relationships, community interactions, trust between local organizations, and committed local leadership are relevant to enhance community engagement in emergency school feeding programs.

The adage "one-size-doesn't fit all", and the paths to community engagement in emergency school feeding programs tend to vary across different settings. The longstanding social, economic, and political factors ingrained in the community affect the path to community engagement in emergency school feeding programs. Although distinguishing one from the other is complex, community-based, school-based, home-based, and NGO based are the key pathways to emergency school feeding programs. The depth and form of community engagement across the different pathways tend to vary. However, all pathways are difficult to implement without community engagement. In the community-based school feeding program, the local or host community has a greater opportunity to participate in the decision-making and intervention activities

Despite the rampant poverty and insecurity issues, strong social assets- such as supportive networks and active trans/local organizations- help build trust between the IDPs and the host community. This trust, in turn, fosters community engagement in emergency school feeding initiatives. The host community demonstrated robust social assets to explore and mobilize a variety of resources, including funding, knowledge, and skills, enhancing their ability to engage in humanitarian emergency response and education development activities. As a result of these strong social assets, a favorable and supportive environment has been created for the education of IDP children education, encouraging parental involvement, mentorship, and community programs that enhance learning opportunities.

Social assets play a crucial role in reactivating and enhancing social capital. Social capital is primarily defined as the networks, relationships, and norms that facilitate cooperation within a

community, leading to increased trust, reciprocity, and mutual support among the IDP community members.

Social capital promotes cooperative negotiations and dialogue among community members, making it easier to resolve the conflict, mobilize efforts for community development, and engage in collective action. Despite the meager resources, the social capital has fostered a sense of civic duty and responsibility, encouraged individuals to contribute to community well-being and engage in supporting IDPs, instilling resilience and motivation in children to pursue their education despite challenges.

Recognizing and valuing community engagement by empowering communities to solve critical problems that emerge during and after crises can address significant humanitarian and development needs. This emphasizes the need for a shift towards empowering communities through self-initiated action, leveraging local knowledge, and fostering inclusivity. Moreover, prioritizing local resources emphasizes the importance of utilizing and mobilizing local social assets and capital to drive community transformation and improve educational outcomes. In this regard, the roles of NGOs and CSOs are crucial to revitalizing, strengthening, and enhancing local capabilities both during crises and in periods of normalcy.

Limitation and Future Research

The exploratory qualitative case study approach offers valuable insights into individual experiences but also faces limitations, particularly in post-conflict settings. Its subjective nature mark to the research bias that can affect interpretations, and small sample sizes restrict generalizability. To mitigate these issues, the research utilized rigorous reflexivity to acknowledge potential biases and applied data triangulation, drawing on interviews, focus groups, and field notes to enhance credibility. Detailed contextual descriptions from Quiha were provided to assist readers in assessing the transferability of findings to similar environments.

In scaling education in emergencies due to multifaceted challenges, the need for further research on the relevance and link between community driven school feeding pathways and displaced children school retention in conflict affected areas seem highly relevant to address responsive policy initiatives relevant to displaced children and parents affected by conflicts.

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